

Review

# Problematizing “Honour Crimes” within the Canadian Context: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis of Popular Media and Political Discourses

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**Abstract:** Honour-based violence has garnered significant attention within Canadian national discourses, especially within popular media and political rhetoric. Frequently conceptualized as a culturally specific form of violence embedded with patriarchal understandings of honour, these crimes have been mobilized within mainstream media to vilify certain ethnic and racial communities, particularly from the Global East. Relying on ethnocentric explanations, honour crimes are imagined as foreign phenomena that have been imported into Canada by immigrant populations who actively resist assimilation and fail to adopt liberal Western values of equality and freedom. This paper seeks to unsettle these very tropes surrounding the “honour crime” label using a postcolonial feminist lens. Drawing on the murder case of Aqsa Parvez, this paper calls into question the discursive strategies used to construct “honour crimes” and the racialized tropes that they perpetuate. Further, this paper examines how this label is mobilized to carry out “political work” and support certain political agendas, which include managing immigrant populations.

**Keywords:** honour crimes; violence against women; postcolonial feminism; racism; discourse analysis; Canada



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## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a dramatic upsurge in media coverage and political rhetoric centering on so-called honour-based violence<sup>1</sup> among racialized communities within the Canadian context [1,2]. The stories and images accompanying this issue tend to depict a unidimensional crime narrative rooted in Orientalist tropes that not only erroneously homogenize the diverse characteristics of South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, creating a monolithic conceptualization of these racialized communities, but also produce binaries between the supposed liberal, developed and secular West<sup>2</sup> versus the conservative, underdeveloped and religious East [3–5]. Such monolithic portrayals simultaneously construct and reinforce the essentialist gendered stereotypes of both men and women within these cultural groups.

Olwan [2] notes that Canadian iterations of popular media discussions regarding honour-based violence have placed particular emphasis on the perpetrators’ adherence to Islam and their immigrant backgrounds—supporting Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment. Editorials published in national newspapers frequently highlight that honour crimes are atypical to Canadian values, instead maintaining that “oppression, particularly against females, exists in many cultures, justified on cultural and religious grounds. These cultures have been exported to Canada” [6] (p. 1). Other journalists have claimed that honour crimes are barbaric cultural practices that are “anathema to Western culture” [2] (p. 1) [7,8], while remaining endemic within migrant Muslim communities [8,9]. These widespread narratives reify the notion that honour-based violence is a foreign affliction that has been introduced into Canada by immigrants refusing to assimilate into Canadian

culture—which is deemed innately more “progressive” in its commitment to gender equality than others [2]. Despite this overwhelmingly ethnocentric coverage of honour-based violence within popular media, there has been a small, but vocal, subset of journalists who have called for these crimes to be understood through a more critical and intersectional lens [10,11].

While engaging with these tensions, this paper seeks to problematize the notion of “honour-based violence” as it appears in Canadian popular media and political discourse by utilizing a transnational feminist lens of analysis. In doing so, the goal is to map the ethnocentric logics and racial ideologies that shape national politics, media representations and public opinion on this issue. The paper begins by providing a general definition and context for honour-based violence as articulated by international/governmental agencies and feminist scholars. It then delves into an analysis of the inherent tensions *within* feminist discourses for understanding honour-based violence and examines the offerings of transnational and postcolonial feminist frameworks as an alternative lens that is better equipped to analyze the intrinsic problems of the “honour crime” label, frequently used to categorize gender-based violence within racialized communities.

By drawing on the polemical works of Chandra Mohanty [5] and her concept of the “Third World woman”; Inderpal Grewal’s [12] examination of Western media’s role in “outsourcing patriarchy”; and what Lila Abu-Lughod [13] describes as the “political work” of honour-based violence (pp. 26, 50), this paper explores how the “honour crime” label has been instrumentalized and deployed through popular discourses to falsely implicate specific cultures, religions and nationalities as being innately patriarchal, misogynistic and violent, and thus has constructed racialized immigrant groups as threats to the integrity of Canadian values and to Western societies [14]. To illustrate this argument, articles from national and local Canadian newspapers were extracted and discursively analyzed to investigate how reports of honour crimes are portrayed in comparison to reports of other domestic or family homicides, drawing specifically on the case of Aqsa Parvez. The aim is to examine how culture is employed as an arbitrary marker of difference between these cases and, subsequently, becomes a basis to justify the “honour crime” label. Although the Parvez case has been previously analyzed elsewhere [2,3,14–17], the current analysis offers a unique and in-depth examination of the case by situating it within specific postcolonial feminist works and precise concepts not previously applied to this case concurrently. This examination further deconstructs exclusive illustrative samples of Canadian news media extracts to demonstrate these connections, thus, contributing to the extant literature on honour-based crimes.

## 2. Defining and Contextualizing Honour-Based Violence in Canada

The use of the term “honour killing” is highly contested, eliciting strong reactions from different groups, with some arguing that such crimes should occupy a unique criminal category and others maintaining that no differentiation should be made from other cases of domestic violence or family murders [3]. Though there is no universal definition that is deemed to be cross-culturally appropriate [18], at the most generic level, honour killing refers to the “premediated murder of preadolescent, adolescent, or adult women by one or more male members of the immediate or extended family. These killings are often undertaken when a family council decides on the time and form of execution due to an allegation, suspicion, or proof of sexual impropriety by the victim” [19] (p. 964). As this definition suggests, honour crimes can be understood as a type of retribution or punishment levied against female members for bringing shame or dishonour to their family name within the wider community, particularly through sexual transgressions [20]. Unni Wikan [21] proposes a similar definition, emphasizing the role that honour and community plays within the crime dynamic, defining it as “a murder carried out to restore honour, not just for a single person but a collective. This presupposes the approval of a supportive audience, ready to reward murder with honour” [21] (p. 73).

The notion of *honour* itself is steeped in gendered understandings of the body and control, making the term “honour crime” a deeply troubling label according to certain feminist and activist groups. In its current usage, the term implies that “women embody the honour of males” [22] (p. 6); hence, the conduct of the woman is seen as a direct reflection of the men who are related to her (e.g., father, brother, husband, etc.) and, by proxy, becomes the men’s responsibility to control. Expanding on this idea, Coomaraswamy [23], writing as the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on violence against women, notes that all forms of violence against women are closely associated with regulation of sexuality. She goes on to explain that:

In many societies the ideal of masculinity is underpinned by a notion of ‘honour’—and is fundamentally connected to policing female behavior and sexuality. Honour is generally seen as residing in the bodies of women. Frameworks of ‘honour’, and its corollary ‘shame’, operate to control, direct and regulate women’s sexuality and freedom of movement by male members of a family. Women who fall in love, engage in nonmarital relationships, seek a divorce or choose their own husbands are seen to transgress the boundaries of ‘appropriate’ (that is, socially sanctioned) behavior. Regulation of such behavior may in some cases involve horrific direct violence—including ‘honour killing’, perhaps the most overt example of the brutal control of female sexuality—as well as indirect subtle control exercised through threats of force or the withdrawal of family benefits and security (p. xi).

A point that should be highlighted in this excerpt is that women’s embodiment of “honour” remains an ideology that cuts across multiple societies. In fact, scholars have suggested that the patriarchal household structures found globally can be genealogically traced to European colonial origins, wherein patriarchal ideologies were mobilized to justify imperial domination—a relationship discussed below [24]. Thus, it appears that contemporary Western conceptualizations remain very simplistic, failing to examine “how honour exists as a complex social value that permeates women’s and men’s lives in multiple registers” [12] (p. 5).

Second, Coomaraswamy [23] notes that the sexual control and policing of women’s bodies has been observed to underlie all types of violence against women—not just honour crimes. This illustrates the problematic approach of isolating the phenomenon of honour-based violence to only a specific community or nationality—at its root, honour-based crime is a form of violence against women. Linking this label to specific ethno-cultural communities obscures the fact that violence against women occurs in all communities [3]. Finally, the use of “honour” and “shame” creates a false justification for the actions of the perpetrator, indicating that the victim was somehow doing something immoral that compelled the perpetrator to act in accordance with cultural values to manage a “private” matter in which the state should not interfere [3].

Other scholars have maintained that honour crimes are, indeed, a distinct category with characteristics that separate them from other forms of violence against women, including domestic violence or “crimes of passion”<sup>3</sup> [14,22]. The Department of Justice Canada [25], for example, identifies three unique characteristics of honour-based violence: (1) it requires *advanced planning* on behalf of the perpetrator and/or other family members and may involve verbal threats of harm to the victim prior to the murder; (2) *familial complicity* is needed, wherein members of the victims family are directly involved in the planning and execution of the crime, such as parents, brothers and cousins; and (3) the *avoidance of stigma* is required, whereby committing the crime would help alleviate any negative stigma about the family within the community.

Though these characterizations may be useful in differentiating between various forms of violence against women, Shier and Shor [14] observe that popular discourses and political rhetoric often ignore these nuances and revert to ethnicity and religion as primary signifiers when labeling domestic homicide as an “honour killing”. This labelling became particularly nascent in the year 2001, following the September 11 attacks on the New York

World Trade Center in the United States (US) by the al-Qaeda extremist group [3,16,26]. It was after this event that the “War on Terror” was declared by the US against Afghanistan and Iraq, two Muslim-majority countries that garnered support from Canada, Europe and much of the West. The rhetoric pertaining to the “War on Terror” carried a great deal of racist and xenophobic overtures that targeted Muslim populations specifically and racialized populations more generally [3]. Coinciding with these global events was the UN General Assembly’s adoption of Resolution 55/66 in 2000, which expanded the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to include honour-based violence [16,27–31]. The resolution, entitled “Working towards the elimination of crimes against women committed in the name of honour”, marked the first time that honour crimes were officially recognized by UN governing bodies [16,27,31,32].

In the same year, it was reported by the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) that approximately 5000 women are murdered annually in honour-related violence worldwide, a figure that is now widely cited by journalists in the West [16,33,34]. In a subsequent progress meeting concerning resolution 55/66 in 2002, a large number of Islamic nations (e.g., Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Turkey, Yemen, etc.) were identified by the UN as having reported honour killings along with “migrant communities in Western countries” [33] (p. 345). These figures and reports published by international governing bodies, such as the UN, provided momentum behind the perception that honour-based violence was a problem of the inherently misogynistic Global East. This, combined with the xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment arising from the post 9/11 “War on Terror”, encouraged the hyper-surveillance and critique of Muslim and racialized populations settled within the West by state and popular discourses [3,16,35].

Unsurprisingly, this xenophobic rhetoric quickly bled into the Canadian context, resulting in the increased scrutinization of immigrant and racialized communities. Canadian mainstream media, for example, was quick to report sensationalized accounts of honour-based crimes tethered to ethnocentric imagery that gained national attention [17]. A dozen of such high-profile cases were reported between 1999 and 2009, coinciding with an increasingly hostile post 9/11 era that targeted immigrants from South Asia and the Middle East [25]. It is within this current that I examine the murder case of Aqsa Parvez. I seek to better understand how Canadian journalists ascribed the “honour crime” label to certain cases of family homicide such as Aqsa’s, while not to others, thus perpetuating negative ethnocentric stereotypes and demonizing specific racialized communities. I also explore the subset of journalists that actively denounced and pushed back against the “honour crime” label.

### 3. Fractured Feminisms, Transnational Perspectives and Honour-Based Violence

Academic debates about honour crimes presented similar burgeoning frictions, mirroring the tensions seen within public discourses on this topic. Feminist groups, legal scholars, and activists found themselves at odds in their conceptualizations of honour-based crime, its cultural linkages, and concerns about how it should be addressed in the politico-legal realm. On one end of the spectrum, radical feminists<sup>4</sup>, most notably Phyllis Chesler [38], vociferously argued that honour crimes are a cultural phenomenon embedded within a backward patriarchal framework inherent to fundamentalist immigrant groups, which, Chesler contends, is very different from other forms of gender-based violence prevalent in the West, including domestic violence. Chesler [38] further argues that honour killings are “primarily a Muslim-on-Muslim crime” (p. 62) and advocates for stringent immigration control and surveillance of racialized groups. Kenneth Lasson [39] a conservative legal scholar, goes as far as to suggest that “deep biases against women are prevalent in much of Muslim society” and “as waves of people from the Middle East have emigrated to Europe and America over the past generation, honour killings have increased exponentially” (p. 408). These essentializing and ethnocentric conceptualizations of patriarchy and honour-based violence imported from “elsewhere” closely parallel the dominant viewpoints posited within Canadian popular media.

Liberal<sup>5</sup> and mainstream feminisms adhere to similar lines of reasoning in their conceptualization of honour-based violence, albeit appearing less militarized, and thus perhaps more insidious in their approach. Liberal feminists frame their theorization around human rights discourses, the progress narrative and the idea of “helping” Muslim women, and others in the Global East realize their liberties and freedoms [4]. Liberal feminists advocate for multiculturalism and religious tolerance under the guise of imparting supposedly progressive Western values onto “oppressed” women in the Global East who are viewed as being in need of education, consciousness raising and enlightenment [4]. Liberal feminists attempt to become the voice of marginalized communities, without actually considering the voices and perspectives of the subaltern itself [41,42]. The influence of liberal feminist rhetoric is particularly salient within Canadian political discourse<sup>6</sup>. It is within these political discussions that, paradoxically, cultural and religious identities are repeatedly isolated as central factors underlying honour-based violence while remaining cloaked in a language of concern and paternalistic duty towards protecting vulnerable women in communities most at risk of being victimized [25].

What both the radical and liberal feminist frameworks establish is a reductionist understanding of violence against women, one that places blame on allegedly perverted cultural norms that are “unfathomable [ . . . ] to Western minds. A vestige of traditional patriarchy [ . . . ] traced largely to ancient tribal practices” [39]. This perspective fails to understand the broader social and political complexities underlying honour-based violence, or more accurately gender-based violence, by focusing narrowly on an artificial “traditional-modern binary axis” of culture [26]. Ethnocentric explanations mask the underlying causes of these criminal incidences by tying them back to the victim’s alleged violation of cultural norms and establishing a cyclical pattern of reasoning superficially linked through culture. This conflation between religion, culture, gender oppression, and honour-based violence has been condemned by transnational and postcolonial feminists who have been vocal in questioning the intentions and accuracy of the “honour crime” label and the blame placed on the backwardness of the Global East. Instead, transnational and postcolonial feminisms draw attention to the historical and geographical structures of inequality that generate gender inequities across the globe, paying particular attention to the role of colonialism and imperialism [26,44]. This approach seeks to reveal the ways in which the First World is able to exert and maintain economic, political and cultural control of the Third World and its diaspora [44].

Patil [24] powerfully captures the essence of transnational and postcolonial feminist thought, noting that it “encourages an examination of how categories of race, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, nation, and gender not only intersect but are mutually constituted, formed and transformed within transnational power-laden processes such as European imperialism and colonialism, neoliberal globalization and so on” (p. 848). This lens offers an alternative approach to the dominant liberal and radical feminist ideologies, which are overrepresented within Western discourses [24,26]. Transnational and postcolonial feminism has the ability to provide a nuanced investigation of honour killings within Canada by moving beyond hegemonic explanations that focus on essentialist ethnocentric, patriarchal, and unidimensional conceptualizations of gender inequities. This paper draws specifically from three postcolonial feminist scholars whose works present a fruitful foundation for deconstructing popular media rhetoric on honour-based violence: Mohanty [5], Abu-Lughod [13], and Grewal [12].

#### 4. Deconstructing Honour-Based Violence: A Postcolonial Feminist Approach

In her canonical essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, Chandra Talpade Mohanty [5] presents a powerful critique of Western feminism’s production of the “Third World woman” as a monolithic, homogenous and inherently powerless subject constructed as a victim of oppressive cultural and socioeconomic systems (p. 66). In this conceptualization, the West served as the primary referent against which women in the Third World were assessed. This point of comparison established an implicit

hierarchy wherein the Third World woman became the Other, the periphery, or the 'object' that needs to be observed, studied and reported on, whereas women of the First World (read: White, middle class, heterosexual) assumed the position of the privileged 'subject', the center, and the source of hegemonic power with the capacity to theorize the Third World through discursive practices.

Underpinning this dichotomous characterization was the understanding that the West was complex, progressive and heterogenous. Mohanty [5] argues that Western feminist discourses appropriated and "discursively colonized the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world" (p. 62). Therefore, Mohanty presents Third World women as a unified group sharing the same interests, desires and oppressions regardless of their class, ethnic or racial locations, being uniformly described as helpless universal dependents (e.g., victims of male violence, colonial process, etc.) in need of saving. Mohanty [5] concludes that Western feminist praxis and scholarship should move beyond ethnocentric universalism and reductionism by historicizing and contextualizing women's experiences within the localities in which they take place, rather than laying blame on "uncivilized" or "problematic" cultural or religious practices.

Mohanty's [5] analysis is germane to the discussion of honour-based violence in Canada because her critiques are exceedingly applicable to the discursive style by which victims of so-called "honour killings" are represented within mainstream media. The authoritative voice of the journalist speaks from the Western (Canadian) standpoint, reporting on the victimization of the powerless Third World woman by her barbaric family and their fundamentalist cultural values—a trope that has saturated popular rhetoric. These discourses have the tendency to homogenize all racialized "brown skinned" women, ignoring any markers of difference (e.g., ethnic, geographical, economic, etc.), and label them as victims of patriarchal cultural oppression.

The focus placed on patriarchal culture as the main explanatory variable underlying honour killings is compellingly critiqued by Inderpal Grewal [12] in her article, "Outsourcing Patriarchy: Feminist Encounters, Transnational Mediations and the Crime of 'Honour Killings'". Grewal [12] argues that the concept of honour killing has grown out of hegemonic understandings of gendered Orientalisms in which the Global East (and its diaspora) is constructed as being naturally governed by patriarchy, while the West is believed to have progressively evolved beyond it. Grewal [12] seeks to unsettle this idea; instead, she argues that the concept of patriarchy has actually been outsourced *by* Western nations, including Canada and the US, to the Global East or other "zones that are believed to be anachronistic to the rest of the country" (p. 2) for personal gain.

Outsourcing is used as a metaphor by Grewal [12] to refer to the network of actors, especially the media, that are involved in shoring up the idea that the patriarchy only exists "out there"; subsequent profits are extracted by sustaining these narratives. Western nations do, indeed, reap a number of benefits by outsourcing the patriarchy to Others, including: financial gain; justification for foreign interventions/wars waged within the Global East (e.g., in order to "save" women from barbaric cultural practices); and the maintenance of moral superiority and political power on a global scale [12]. The process of outsourcing has important implications for understanding how honour crimes are sensationalized within the media. Drawing from 900 entries on "honour killings" in transnational print media, Grewal [12] found that within Western nations:

violence against women is blamed on individual criminality rather than cultural factors in the case of white males; for minority groups, it is linked to pathological cultures . . . This approach constitutes [the West] as modern and incapable of 'honour killings' and focuses a gaze on the other's capacity for 'honour killings' (p. 7).

By individualizing the blame to a single perpetrator, the West engages in the erasure of patriarchy within its own context; it effectively distances itself from acknowledging the role that patriarchal power relations play on gender-based violence. Nevertheless, when examining women's experiences of violence within racialized communities, a totalizing,

static, and essentialist notion of patriarchy continues to be blindly applied and associated with culture.

Patil's [24] analysis of the imperial roots of patriarchy is apt here, wherein she argues that the notion of patriarchy itself is a Western construct (p. 850). This lends further support to Grewal's [12] thesis that patriarchy has been instrumentalized as a tool of domination by the West, historically and within the current moment. Patil [24] demonstrates that the male-headed family structure served as the archetypal model for political rule within Europe and its colonies during the 19th century; it was through this patriarchal imagery that colonizers asserted paternalistic control over conquered populations through a process of disempowerment, infantilization, force and discipline (p. 855). This framework concurrently shaped household dynamics *within* the colonies, thereby establishing domestic patriarchies where none had previously existed [24] (p. 848). Thus, the Western view that patriarchy is inherent only to the Global East, is in itself a dehistoricized, depoliticized and decontextualized perspective. In a similar vein, Grewal [12] calls for honour-based violence to be assessed through a more nuanced lens which recognizes socioeconomic and political factors, moving beyond the media's one-dimensional focus on patriarchy, culture and religion.

In Lila Abu-Lughod's [13] poignant essay, "Seductions of the 'Honour Crime'", she lays the foundation for Grewal's [12] examination of patriarchy by looking more broadly at the political work that the "honour crime" label carries out within the West. Drawing from her ethnographic research, Abu-Lughod [13] undertakes an in-depth review of biographical, scholarly and fiction texts; reports from non-governmental organizations; and popular media coverage on highly publicized cases of alleged honour killings across Europe. In particular, two key observations are made: first, Abu-Lughod [13] argues that the proliferation of cultural tropes and legal interpretations about honour crimes occlude sociopolitical injustices (e.g., racism, anti-immigration sentiment, Islamophobia, etc.) and the complex truths and voices that underlie them, frequently seen in scholarly and political discourses.

At the same time, Abu-Lughod [13] notes that, within sensationalized mass media coverage, there is a tendency to romanticize honour-based violence by dredging up tropes of forbidden love, the controlling patriarch, secrecy and repressed women's desires for freedom—a formulation that has given honour crimes an exotic and seductive power readily consumed by Western audiences for its entertainment value. This fantasy imagery has simultaneously bolstered the moral fear of barbaric cultural practices being transported into Western national borders and endangering modern values [13]. It is through the work of these representations that predominantly white liberal feminists and the state have found solidarity, vowing to "save brown women from brown men" through partnerships and unwarranted interventions, as postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak [42] (p. 92) notably argued.

Underlying these self-righteous movements is the idealization of liberal values (e.g., individualism, personal autonomy, and free choice) and a concurrent undermining of racialized communities' collective experiences and their values, such as honour (i.e., viewed in terms of dignity or morality rather than patriarchal domination)—which differs drastically from Western media's interpretations of these concepts [13] (p. 23). Through her analysis, Abu-Lughod [13] brilliantly dismantles the political work of honour crimes, noting how the strategic deployment of this rhetoric has been mobilized to achieve specific goals for the state, including:

The policing and exclusions of immigrants, states' disciplinary penetration of rural and urban subaltern communities, particular attempts at domination by national or ethnic groups, general defenses of liberalism, attracting funds for grassroots social service and feminist projects and research, international militarism, and new forms of transnational governance carried out in the name of rights or humanitarianism (p. 52).

Effectively, Abu-Lughod [13] asserts that honour-based violence is used as a tool; however, this relationship can only be understood through a deep analysis of the intersect-

ing and overlapping domains permeating all levels of society; to paint this phenomenon with broad ethnocentric brushstrokes, as popular media do, obscures the complexity of this issue.

## 5. Methods

### 5.1. Representing Honour Crimes in the Canadian Context

Building on the critiques presented by postcolonial and transnational feminist theorists, this section seeks to provide a nuanced analysis of honour crimes within the Canadian context. I begin by examining how honour crimes are represented within mainstream Canadian print media using a discursive analysis by drawing on the case of Aqsa Parvez, a story that received a substantial amount of publicity and became widely recognized as the quintessential example of an “honour crime” across the nation [45]. Second, I juxtapose these media representations against examples of family murder cases that have not earned the “honour crime” label. The intent of this comparison is to illuminate how popular Canadian media representations and political discourses have embraced the common cultural tropes and ethnocentric explanations of honour-based violence, as observed by Abu-Lughod [13], Grewal [12], and Mohanty [5]. In addition to analyzing the discourses presented in popular news media, I also engage with the political rhetoric that this particular case, and the “honour crime” label in general, brought to the fore. Finally, I discuss counternarratives to the dominant representations of honour crimes that have been advocated by a subset of journalists; opening up the possibility of reorienting the “honour crime” label in ways that do not marginalize particular cultural communities.

### 5.2. “Honour Crimes” within Canadian Mainstream Media: Sampling and Analytical Procedure

The articles used to construct the Parvez case study were compiled from Canadian print media sources. A search of the Dow Jones Factiva online archival database was conducted using combinations of the keywords: “Aqsa Parvez”, “honour”, “killing”, “crime”, and “murder”. Searches were configured to include articles published between December 2007 (the month of Aqsa’s murder) to March 2020. Three major national and local Canadian newspapers were searched: The National Post, Globe and Mail and Toronto Star. These newspapers were selected based on their popularity and recognition across Canada. All three newspapers are among the most widely read and circulated mainstream news media sources in the country [46]. For example, in 2015, the Globe and Mail averaged a daily circulation of 336,487 copies, followed by the Toronto Star with 318,763 copies, and the National Post with 186,108 copies [47]. In terms of weekly averages, the Toronto Star maintained the highest circulation at 2,231,338 copies because of its seven-day publication schedule [47]. The Globe and Mail and The National Post, both with six-day publication schedules, circulated approximately 2,018,923 and 1,116,647 copies per week, respectively [47].

Moreover, each of these newspapers assumed a differing political standpoint, representing voices from across the political spectrum [14]. The Toronto Star, based locally in Ontario and broadly distributed across other Canadian provinces, is a relatively left-leaning or a center-left publication. The nationally distributed Globe and Mail is considered a centrist or center-right publication, whereas the National Post is a more right-leaning or conservative publication [14]. These national newspapers were included to capture the narratives prevalent across the Canadian context, while the local newspaper, popular within Ontario, was included to capture narratives at the provincial level where the murder took place. By sampling from politically and regionally diverse news sources, this critical analysis offers a representative examination of the multiple perspectives dominating mainstream media regarding the Parvez case. This approach ensured that the newspapers analyzed were not just sampled from one end of the political spectrum<sup>7</sup> (i.e., right-leaning newspapers) or a single region. Thus, extracting samples from diverse news sources ensured that the conclusions drawn in this paper captured general themes prevalent across Canadian mainstream media *en bloc*.



A preliminary search of the Factiva database using the abovementioned keywords revealed a combined total of 246 articles, commentaries, and editorials that had been published on Aqsa Parvez's murder from all three newspaper outlets<sup>8</sup>. This included 71 articles from the *Globe and Mail*, 96 articles from the *National Post*, and 79 from the *Toronto Star*. Next, I manually analyzed each news piece, beginning with a rapid preliminary scan of the titles, removing any duplicate articles in the process ( $n = 14$ ). In addition, I removed any articles that did not focus on the case of Aqsa Parvez as its central subject of discussion. For example, any articles that only briefly or passively mentioned the Parvez case were eliminated ( $n = 73$ ). The remaining 159 articles were retained and examined in full.

This final set of articles was examined using critical discourse analysis (CDA), informed specifically by postcolonial feminist theory and the works of Chandra Mohanty [5], Inderpal Grewal [12], and Lila Abu-Lughod [13] outlined in the preceding section. CDA, as an analytical method, emerged in the late 1980s through the works of Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Tuen van Dijk, and others [48,49]. This approach recognizes that all discourse is socially, ideologically, and politically constituted. The goal of CDA is to be explicit about exposing the political nature of texts by examining the effects of power hierarchies, historical political struggles, and structural inequalities on the construction of the discourses that compose them [50]. By studying text features, such as word choice, tone, key themes, denotative and connotative meanings, structure, voice, organization, style, and the overall content of a piece, CDA can detect the patterns, biases, stereotypes, and views that underlie it. At its core, CDA is a praxis-oriented methodology, advocating for social change by providing a voice to the voiceless, uncovering power asymmetries, and seeking discursive transformation [48].

For the current study, CDA was conducted by obtaining all of the 159 articles in PDF format, reading them in full, and analyzing each in a holistic manner. I followed the two-cycle text analysis and coding procedure outlined by Johnny Saldaña [51]. In the first cycle of analysis and coding, I read each news piece multiple times to ensure that I had an accurate and complete understanding of the content. During each reading, particular attention was given to three analytical areas: (1) style, tone, and overall presentation of the news article; (2) key themes, patterns, and explanations provided about the Parvez case; and (3) the invocation of specific terms, imagery, biases, or tropes as identified by postcolonial feminist critiques (e.g., *Us/Them* dichotomy, *Othering*, and the image of the "Third World Woman"). While reading, I annotated each article using the text highlighter and sticky-note features within Adobe Acrobat PDF Reader. I applied holistic coding to identify common patterns or key ideas across all the articles within the three newspaper sources [51]. In the second cycle of coding, I compiled the annotations from the holistic codes together and generated a condensed set of broad themes and concepts that emerged from the readings, a process referred to as pattern coding [51]. Finally, I used the themes distilled from the analysis, specific illustrative examples from the articles, and postcolonial feminist concepts to compose a critical case study of the Parvez case presented in the following section.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Case Study and Analysis: Aqsa Parvez

On 10 December 2007, sixteen-year-old Aqsa Parvez was murdered in the basement of her family home in Mississauga, Ontario. News articles reported that Aqsa had been strangled to death by her brother, Waqas, at the directive of their father, Muhammed Parvez, in an apparent "honour killing" [52,53]. On 15 June 2010, both father and son pled guilty to second-degree murder and were sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole for 18 years [54]. This ruling was broadly deemed a victory for Aqsa by popular media coverage of the case [55]. It was further touted as a progressive step towards justice for women—especially immigrant women—experiencing interpersonal violence at the hands of family in the name of "honour" [56]. But the question remains: how truly

“successful” was this widespread media coverage in representing interpersonal violence within immigrant families?

The intent of this critical analysis is not to reduce the severity of Aqsa’s victimization or to deny the existence of honour-based violence. Rather, the goal here is to look at the way in which the “honour crime” label, along with its associated tropes, is mobilized within popular news media for political purposes. Moreover, the aim is to better understand how Aqsa’s case was treated because of this label. I examine the language and discursive features that appear prominently within these news reports. I also question the intent behind these publications by asking: why was this case conveyed in the way that it was? Is there an implicit motive underlying this publication, and what implications could it have on immigrant/racialized communities? How might a postcolonial feminist framework deconstruct these representations? By critically examining the discourses within popular media, I hope to find an answer to these pressing questions.

At first glance, while skimming through the titles of the articles found, it was immediately obvious that culture, religion and the concept of “honour” feature heavily within the newspaper coverage of Aqsa’s murder case. Headlines such as: “Tribalism is Indeed the Problem” [57]; “Teen Death Highlights Cultural Tensions” [58]; “The Deadly Face of Muslim Extremism” [59]; “How Canada let Aqsa Down” [60]; “Teen Tried to Leave Strict Family” [61]; “Different Shades of Honour” [62]; “Religion, Resistance, Tragedy” [63]; “Immigrant Teens Stuck in Middle” [64]; “Hijab can Divide Families” [65]; and “The Tragedy of Honour Killings” [66], amongst other similar titles, establish a culturally focused picture about Aqsa’s murder and her family’s motivation. The alarmist tone of these headlines coupled with emotional imagery work to target and cathect the fantasies of Western audiences, as Abu-Lughod [13] (p. 26) argues, spawning moral panics, fear and anger.

Aqsa emigrated from Pakistan to Canada when she was eleven years old in 2001 [54]. She was the youngest of eight children, and her father was a taxi driver with little formal education and little knowledge of English, details that have been foundational to the retelling of this story. On the day of her murder, Aqsa was picked up from a bus stop by her brother as she waited there with a friend. Not long after, her father notified that police that he had killed his daughter “with his bare hands” [54]. The sensationalized media coverage that followed remained hyper-focused on the tumultuous relationship between Aqsa and her family; indicating that she had run away from home on several occasions, even opting to stay at a shelter [67].

These tensions allegedly stemmed from Aqsa’s refusal to wear a hijab, the traditional Islamic head covering, preferring to wear a more “urban-style jeans and t-shirt” to the disdain of her family [67]. Her group of friends was also highlighted as a point of contention, as she “hung out with girls outside her own culture” [67]. Two weeks prior to the murder, Aqsa was temporarily living at a friend’s home and had confided that she feared for her safety since her father had sworn “on the Koran [*sic*] that if she ran away again, he would kill her” [52,54]. From these excerpts, the media’s fixation on cultural narratives is clear; an emphasis is placed on the family’s immigrant status, their adherence to Islam and the tensions between so-called backward Pakistani values and modern Canadian ones. Her family is painted as innately brutal and barbaric, with frequent references to Aqsa’s father’s repeated threats and the claim that he killed Aqsa with his *bare hands*. These images perpetuate the “clash of cultures” trope that is often deployed within journalistic representations of ethnic minorities [35].

#### 6.1.1. Dichotomization of East and West

While some of the articles included in the analysis ( $n = 62$ ) maintained a neutral tone, the vast majority ( $n = 97$ ) were entrenched within an Orientalist framework that bifurcated the West from the East, constructing the West as fundamentally superior. This dichotomization of East and West was a central theme identified across the articles during the analysis. For example,<sup>9</sup> in an emotionally charged exposé about Aqsa published by the Globe and Mail, Margaret Wente [68] lambasts lenient immigration policies for importing patriarchal

values into Canada, while simultaneously demonizing Islam and Eastern cultural practices for their supposed misogyny as the root causes of Aqsa's victimization. This passage exemplifies Wente's [68] perspective:

The Parvez males came from a backward rural town with strict Islamic values and a culture of domestic violence [ . . . Aqsa's] father's rule was absolute. The women [in Aqsa's family] wore traditional dress. None went past high school and none worked outside the home. They were completely dependent on [the men . . . ] Aqsa did not want to live like them. She wanted to wear Western clothes, go to the mall with her Western friends and get a part-time job.

The divide between Eastern and Western values is clearly highlighted here, where Western values are described as progressive and something that others, such as Aqsa, desired to attain. Also evident within this excerpt is Grewal's [12] concept of outsourcing patriarchy. Specifically, Wente [68] insinuates that misogyny and male domination is a foreign problem that is endemic to localities such as rural Pakistan but is nonexistent in the Canadian context where everyone exercises freedom of choice. According to Wente [68], it was this pathological patriarchy imported into Canada by Aqsa's family that led to her demise. Similar descriptions of Aqsa's father as the controlling "patriarch" of the family with conservative "Muslim" values were observed across multiple publications [69–71].

In a similar vein, the monolithic image of the Third World woman, as Mohanty [3] coined it, is also deployed by Wente [68] when she constructs the women in Aqsa's family as passive victims of male control within the home. The mobilization of these tropes creates a simplistic image of not only Aqsa's family, but all diasporic communities hailing from the Global East, especially South Asia and the Middle East. Wente [68] confirms this perspective by warning Western democracies to focus on learning "how to integrate the newcomers into *our* societies—and how to turn them into citizens<sup>10</sup>". This statement is highly political; no longer is this story just about Aqsa's murder, it now becomes a public service announcement about observing immigrant communities and the potential dangers of allowing unchecked migrants through Canadian borders. Undoubtedly, the "honour crime" label here is used here to carry out what Abu-Lughod [13] describes as "political work" through calculated discursive moves.

Jonathan Kay's [71] article in the National Post is another example that builds on similar edicts that essentialize the Global East and West. Kay [71] equates the East with backwards thinking, patriarchal tribalism, and bolsters the Third World woman trope by stating that, "[i]n most of South Asia and the Middle East, humans are viewed not primarily as individuals, but as agents of a family, tribe, clan or sect [ . . . ] a woman [is] primarily [seen] as a low-status breeding agent of her patriarch's clan". Kay [71] contrasts this imagery with the purported progressiveness of the West, noting that, "[i]n the West, we take it for granted that human beings are autonomous individuals. We decide for ourselves how we dress, where we work, whom we marry [ . . . ] Individualism has become so fundamental to the Western world view that most of us cannot imagine any other way of conceiving human existence [ . . . ] This fundamental difference in outlook explains much of what we find barbaric about traditional Muslim cultural practices." Through this excerpt, Kay [71] discursively establishes the West as monolithically superior and forward-thinking, all the while pigeon-holing the East as prehistoric, primitive, and unevolved. Not only is Kay's [71] discussion reductive, it also erroneously confounds culture with religion vis-à-vis the statement "Muslim cultural practices". Through these precise discursive moves, Kay [71] fashions a narrative that removes all nuance and diversity from characterizing the East and West. By using pronouns such as "us" and "we", Kay [71] goes on to erect a boundary that artificially separates Canadians from racialized immigrants (i.e., understood as "them" or the "Other").

Sentiments about the binarization of Eastern and Western values were likewise shared by Judith Timson [72] in her piece published in the Globe and Mail. An analysis of the prose utilized in her article indicates an attempt to develop the seductive character of honour crimes. By focusing on Aqsa's sexual freedom, Timson [72] attempts to romanticize her

story—a method that Abu-Lughod [13] notes is characteristic of Western liberal discussions on this issue. For example, Timson [72] writes:

Aqsa Parvez was not the first [teenager] to leave the house in one outfit and change into another bolder, more revealing set of clothes on her way to school. Teenage girls have done it for years, defying their dismayed parents to make a statement about their burgeoning sexuality and independence. They disappear around the corner and hike their skirts up, apply full-tilt lipstick [ . . . ] in an effort to be cool, to be noticed, and above all morph into the object of desire they so desperately want to be.

In this passage, Timson [72] presents a sensational description of what it means to be a “normal” Westernized teenager, while at the same time implying the abnormality, primitiveness and stagnant character of the East for not being able to understand this phase of teenage rebellion. Timson [72], and many other journalists, attempt to invoke images of cultural conflict where Pakistani culture and, more generally, cultures of the Global East, are always pathologized. At the same time, by framing a violent and heinous murder as a fantasized story of rebellion gone wrong—Timson [72] appears to be pandering to the “voyeuristic titillation” of Western audiences [13] (p. 29).

#### 6.1.2. Demonization of Muslim Communities and Politicization of the Hijab

An analysis of the news articles also revealed numerous debates sparked by Aqsa’s murder that focused intently on religion, particularly on Islam and its alleged connection to honour killings and the control of women. These debates within the news articles reinvigorated the already heated discussions surrounding the alleged cultural inferiority of the Global East versus the West within Canadian print media at the time, adding urgency to concerns about immigrant populations’ resistance towards Canadian values [9,60]. Both culture and religion were often employed within the news pieces to strategically perpetuate an Us versus Them dichotomy, establishing a hardened barrier between the newspaper’s main target audience (i.e., White, liberal, democratic, secular, Canadian) and that of the offender’s community (i.e., racialized, traditional, conservative, Muslim, immigrant). Through the instrumentalization of common tropes and linguistic tools the audience is encouraged to lament the degradation of Canadian progressive values caused by the supposed infiltration of foreign religious and cultural dogmas [9,16]. What is often lost within these article’s grand narratives and practices of Othering is the focus on the actual underlying causes of Aqsa’s murder. Unfortunately, culture and religion become the crime’s explanatory zenith.

An article published in the National Post by Barbara Kay [60] illustrates this distorted emphasis on religion, wherein she instrumentally draws on Aqsa’s “honour killing” as a vehicle to demonize Islamic practices, particularly the act of veiling. According to Kay [60]:

The hijab is rather a public sign of supervised sexual modesty, and marks those wearing it as chattel, leashed to their fathers and brothers as surely as if they were wearing a dog collar. [It] is one end of a female-submissive spectrum that ends in the burka, a garment *virtually all* Canadians find antithetical to *our* values. [ . . . ] How many thousands of Aqsas hate the hijab but wear it without complaint because they fear their fathers’ and brothers’ wrath?<sup>11</sup>

As evidenced by this excerpt, Kay [60] reduces the cause of Aqsa’s homicide to a battle over religious attire. In this excerpt, the hijab is politicized and mobilized as a tool that pushes the author’s own agenda. All nuance is removed from her analysis, including any consideration of structural or social factors that may have given rise to the tensions between Aqsa and her family. Instead, what Kay’s [60] interpretation offers is a xenophobic attack on the Canadian Muslim community, labelling Muslims as homogeneously violent, intolerant and barbaric, a trope that has frequently been deployed by other journalists as well [14]. Kay [60] perpetuates the Us/Them binary by pitting Islam against secular Canadian values; she uses phrases such as “our values” to exclude Muslim populations

from the rest of Canada. Using Aqsa's story and rhetoric about the hijab, Kay [60] advocates for the removal of religious symbols from schools; accusing feminists and supporters of multiculturalism for turning a blind eye towards this issue. As observed in the article by Wente [68], this piece also carries out "political work" by pushing a unique political agenda and exploiting the "honour crime" label to justify covert forms of racism and promote anti-immigrant sentiment [13].

## 6.2. "Family Murder" within Canadian Mainstream Media

As a point of comparison, I now turn to examples of family murders reported within Canadian popular media that have not been labelled "honour crimes", despite sharing many circumstantial similarities that would otherwise justify the label. These cases were identified by searching the Dow Jones Factiva database for articles published between January 2007 and March 2020<sup>12</sup>, using combinations of the keywords "Canada", "family", "murder", "homicide", and "parent\* kill\*". Article searches were restricted to Canadian sources; however, they were not limited to any particular newspaper company (as the criteria used when examining the Parvez case were). An initial search of Factiva resulted in a combined total of 725 articles. Article titles were scanned and any unrelated and duplicate titles were removed ( $n = 331$ ). When examining the news articles, I looked for specific cases where parents or immediate family had attempted to or had committed the murder of a family member, especially a child or teenager (e.g., cases of filicide) to allow for a better comparison to the Parvez case. I examined articles holistically, paying attention to: (1) how the authors had presented the cases; (2) reasons provided for the murder and descriptions of the perpetrator(s); (3) any specific imagery or stereotypes invoked within the news piece. In addition to the Factiva database search, I subsequently conducted a Google News search using the same set of keywords and criteria to double-check for any cases that may have otherwise been missed within the Factiva database. From my search, I isolated illustrative examples to demonstrate how "family murders" were commonly characterized within Canadian popular media and how this contrasted with the presentation of the Parvez case<sup>13</sup>.

The first illustrative case is of Tiffany Gayle, a fifteen-year-old girl residing in Brampton, Ontario who was murdered by her father and step-mother in the basement of their family home on 12 June 2010 [73]. At once, the similarities between both Tiffany and Aqsa's cases are striking; both victims were around the same age at the time of murder, living within Peel Region, and even the location of the crime scenes are mirrored (basement of the family home). Yet, Aqsa's murder garnered sensational media attention, grabbing headlines across the nation, while Tiffany's case seemed to go unnoticed. In fact, a search on the Factiva database using Tiffany's name returns only thirteen results, which is miniscule compared to the hundreds of articles citing Aqsa. What could possibly have led to this drastic difference in media coverage? A closer examination of Tiffany's murder complicates this question even further.

According to news reports, Tiffany was a "quiet and sensitive girl" who had emigrated from Jamaica to live with her family in Canada [74]. However, her relationship with her parents was strained, with Tiffany and her siblings living under strict house rules and regularly being subjected to corporal punishment [74]. On the day of her death, Tiffany was brutally beaten by her parents—though a motive for the beating was never clearly identified [73,74]. The parallels between Tiffany and Aqsa's deaths are uncanny, yet "honour" is never once mentioned as a motive in Tiffany's case nor is any reference to culture ever made. According to the articles, Tiffany's parent's actions were attributed to their violent personalities and personal motives, rather than cultural ones [74]. Another important difference between both cases was the discursive style used to report them: articles about Tiffany were written very objectively, stating facts with little emotion; whereas, those about Aqsa were filled with emotional imagery, ethnocentric innuendos and references to her family's observance of Islam.

The differences observed between both cases are corroborated by Shier and Shor [14], who found that news media describing honour killings always frame the root cause of the crime in terms of ethnic, cultural and religious differences, whereas “general” family murder cases tend to focus on the perpetrator’s individual pathology, personality or psychological condition to explain the crime. In Tiffany’s case, the crime purportedly resulted from individual anomalies in her parent’s personalities; but in Aqsa’s case, the anomaly was her traditional Pakistani culture and Muslim-ness, which supposedly manifested through her father’s patriarchal beliefs and violent actions.

A second example of a family murder where the perpetrator’s actions were individually pathologized by the media is Jacob Forman, who was found guilty of murdering his wife and two young daughters in Kelowna, British Columbia [75]. The media coverage of this case focused largely on his alcohol addiction, narcissism and anger problems as the underlying causes of the crime [75]. Once again, no attribution to culture was made. Likewise, in the case of a Toronto man, George Arsoniadis, who killed and dismembered his sister in July 2007, the reason for the murder was attributed to a family fight in which the brother was simply acting in self-defence [76].

Finally, a news piece by Jack Knox [77] called “How could a parent kill, and how can we stop them?” explores the reasons behind filicides by drawing on five Canadian cases, none of which occurred within racialized immigrant families. Knox [77] presents these cases in a much more individualistic light, noting several underlying causes, such as: psychotic mental disorders, personality disorders, depression, spousal revenge, child maltreatment, or altruistic filicides [77]. Never is culture or religion mentioned as an underlying cause, nor are any particular stereotypes or tropes about any particular community invoked in the discussion. Rather, Knox [77] presents a discussion of filicides that maintains a very neutral and fact-driven tone, which starkly contrasts with the emotive and impassioned reporting characteristic of the Parvez case. These journalistic examples illustrate the differences in how “honour crimes” are conceptualized and presented versus family murders; whereas culture is consistently invoked and vilified in the former case, individual pathology or circumstance underpin the latter.

## 7. Discussion

The discursive analysis of mainstream print media in Aqsa’s murder case reveals the complex ways in which the “honour crime” label has been deployed to bolster certain tropes about culture and religion not seen in other cases of family murders. In effect, specific nationalities, ethnicities and religious groups have come to be viewed as inseparable from honour-based violence; resulting in the homogenized depiction of the Global East as a monolithic geography where patriarchy, honour and violence dominate and where the Third World woman is victimized [5]. A quote by Aqsa’s father was frequently cited by news media in an attempt to capture the apparent foreign-ness of the honour crime wherein he says: “My community will say you have not been able to control your daughter. This is my insult. She is making me naked” [78]. This Othering of patriarchy and gender-based violence simply exploits the “honour crime” label for ulterior political purposes and ignores the endemic presence of family violence within Canada amongst all racial and ethnic groups.

Mainstream discourses have mobilized the honour crime label to convey politically and racially charged messages that ironically divert attention *away* from the issue of violence against women, instead focusing on perpetuating anti-immigrant sentiment, Islamophobia, attacking political correctness, blaming feminist groups/other advocates of multiculturalism, and marginalizing/stereotyping ethnic minorities [13,14,16]. Similar patterns where the “honour crime” label is misappropriated by mainstream media to justify racist and anti-immigrant sentiments have been consistently observed across other highly publicized cases within Canada, including: the Shafia murders (2007), and the murders of Amandeep Atwal (2003), Khatera Siddiqui (2006), and Amandeep Dhillon (2009), amongst others [2,25]. Unsurprisingly, the majority of these honour killings were only highlighted by the media

in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks; indicating a relationship between these murders and the racist and Islamophobic overtures found within popular media discourses pertaining to these crimes.

### 7.1. Mobilizing the “Honour Crime” Label in Popular and Political Rhetoric

Paralleling representations of honour-based violence within popular media are political discourses that have also perpetuated ethnocentric ideologies within the Canadian context, similarly amplified after the 9/11 attacks. For example, on 18 June 2015, The Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act (Bill S-7) was enacted into law that introduced several amendments to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, Civil Marriage Act and the Criminal Code [79]. Amongst the various changes, including the criminalization of polygamy, forced marriage and child marriage, was the focus placed on “honour” killings. A brief discussion of Bill S-7 is pertinent here given that the amendments were, in part, motivated by the murder of Aqsa Parvez and similar “honour crimes” in the Canadian context.

The language used within Bill S-7 reveals ethnocentric and xenophobic undertones mimicking the rhetoric observed within popular media discourses [79]. The use of “barbaric cultural practices” in the title, for instance, invokes particularly violent imageries of the Other; stereotypes that have been employed since the colonial era. The implication that certain “barbaric” populations, especially from the Global East, need to be controlled through state intervention becomes immediately apparent [79]. The term “barbaric” frequently appeared within the media coverage of the Aqsa Parvez case.

The backgrounder on Bill S-7 states that, “Canada will not tolerate any type of violence against women [ . . . ] in the name of so-called ‘honour’. [The Government] send[s] a strong message to those in Canada—and those wishing to come to Canada—that such practices will not be tolerated on Canadian soil” [80]. This quote embodies Grewal’s [12] concept of outsourcing patriarchy. By emphasizing the Us/Them dichotomy, the problem of honour crimes is seen as existing outside of Canadian borders amongst foreign populations. Within the political realm<sup>14</sup>, the “honour crime” label is used to justify the policing and surveillance of immigrant groups and national borders under the paternalistic guise of protection. This, as Abu-Lughod [13] argues within her paper, is how the “honour crime” label is usurped by both the state and media to carry out “political work”.

### 7.2. Resisting Labels and Acknowledging Structural Inequities

This discussion, thus far, has focused on deconstructing dominant representations of honour-based violence within mainstream media by looking at how the “honour crime” label has been mobilized to reinforce certain political agendas and motives. As a result of this instrumentalization, the “honour crime” label has become a tool through which certain ethnic and racial groups have been targeted and demonized as threats to Canadian liberal values, perpetuating colonial tropes and ethnocentric stereotypes [10].

Though this is a prevailing narrative, it is important to highlight that popular media are not a monolith, and not all media coverage about Aqsa, or honour-based violence in general, has been homogenous. In fact, a vocal subset of journalists has actively resisted the “honour crime” label by challenging its accuracy and questioning its usefulness. Gerald Caplan [82], for example, offered a poignant reflection in the *Globe and Mail* that questioned the media’s preoccupation with honour-based crimes given that violence against women, in general, is a rampant problem across Canada irrespective of the ethnic background of the victim or perpetrator. Caplan [82] highlights that between 2002 and 2007, over 212 women were killed by their partners in Ontario alone, compared to only 12 alleged honour killings reported across *all* of Canada between 1999 and 2009 [25,82]. Violence against women is, Caplan [82] notes, fundamentally an issue of widespread gender inequality rather than a limited cultural problem. It just so happens that cases involving minority immigrant groups are deemed more newsworthy than “run-of-the-mill” domestic homicide cases,

which rarely receive media coverage [82]. At its root, violence against women runs much deeper than superficial cultural or religious explanations.

Azeezah Kanji has also written several powerful editorials within the Toronto Star that counter popular rhetoric on this issue [83,84]. In one article, entitled “Multiculturalism isn’t Bad for Women—but Racism is”, Kanji [84] argues “the pretense that misogyny stems from an immigrant culture and not ‘our’ culture permits Canada to avoid its own heavy responsibility for violence against women”. She continues by asserting that this approach ignores:

the social and economic reasons that racialized women are vulnerable to violence, reasons that have little to do with their culture but a great deal to do with the disadvantages they face in Canadian society. These disadvantages include fear of poverty and homelessness [ . . . ]; the fear of being further traumatized by racist police; the fear of jeopardizing immigration status by leaving an abusive situation [84].

This discussion brings to the forefront important concerns about structural violence that immigrants and racialized communities face, but which are often ignored within dominant media representations and political discussions. Frequently broad structural factors, such as poverty, exacerbate familial conflict and the risk of violence [85]. By reducing violence against women to a cultural issue and labelling it an “honour crime”, these broader social inequities become occluded. Reyhana Patel [11], writing for the Globe and Mail has also raised concerns about the Islamophobic tropes seen in sensationalist media coverage and argues for a reframing of the “notion of honour and its manifold meanings” [11]. Paralleling the concerns shared by postcolonial and transnational feminists, these journalists demonstrate the need for a deeper analysis of honour-based violence, one that extends beyond blaming religion and culture. In order to productively tackle all forms of violence against women, economic and social barriers that prevent victims from seeking help in the first place must be addressed.

### 7.3. Implications and Recommendations

Keeping in mind the critiques levied against the “honour crime” label from the post-colonial feminist perspective, it remains crucial to consider the widespread implications of this label and possible recommendations to counter its usage within Canadian popular media and political discourse. Three specific consequences result from the deployment of the “honour crime” label for both minority immigrant populations and for women in general. First, the “honour crime” label perpetuates harmful tropes about immigrant, racialized, and minority communities through the deliberate discursive techniques of Othering, outsourcing patriarchy, establishing Us/Them binaries, demonizing Muslim communities, and reinforcing the image of the helpless Third World woman. Research shows that the uncritical consumption of such imagery reproduces stereotypes leading to further discrimination against racialized and immigrant groups as well as internalized racism see [86–90]. Popular media has a powerful influence on how Canadians perceive and interpret their day-to-day social realities [88].

A second major consequence of employing the “honour crime” label is that it obscures the structural factors underlying familial violence within immigrant and minority communities. For example, in the Parvez case, none of the news articles focused on broad social factors influencing family dynamics within the Parvez household. Could there have been financial difficulties creating tensions within the home? Did racism impact the family? Were there institutional barriers preventing Aqsa from seeking help *before* the incident? Although the role of such factors in Aqsa’s case is speculation at this point, it is a significant blind spot that the media failed to explore in their reporting of the case, opting for a focus on ethnocentric explanations instead. Numerous studies have shown that increased familial violence is associated with broad structural influences and social inequities, such as poverty, unemployment, social cohesion, disorganization/instability, and neighbourhood/community-level variables [85,91,92]. Moreover, financial and institu-



tional barriers (e.g., difficulty accessing appropriate help) can further complicate cases of family violence [93].

A final implication of using the “honour crime” label is that it occludes the larger issue of violence against women across Canada. As discussed in the preceding section, “everyday” cases of violence against women are generally not deemed newsworthy and receive little to no media coverage compared to the culturally entrenched cases of “honour crimes”. Yet, national crime statistics indicate that violence against women is undeniably a wide-ranging and systemic problem regardless of the ethnic background of the victim or perpetrator. In 2018, for example, 8 in 10 victims of domestic violence in Canada were women, while 77% of all domestic violence homicide victims were women [94]. In 2019, women accounted for 79% of the 107,810 people aged 15 and over who experienced intimate partner violence [95]. Women are also 3.5 times more likely to experience intimate partner violence compared to their male counterparts [95]. These figures demonstrate the superficiality of the “honour crime” label in its inability to capture the magnitude and nuance of violence against women, as a whole, in Canada.

To overcome these consequences of utilizing the “honour crime” label within journalistic and political discourse, efforts need to be made to counter and move away from its usage. Popular media coverage should actively promote equality through appropriate regulation of discourses. Instead of fostering anti-immigrant sentiment, offering xenophobic interpretations and homogenously labelling specific ethnic groups as inherently “barbaric”, efforts need to be invested in supporting language that is sensitive to diversity and inclusion. One option is to use an intersectional approach to journalism [96]. Intersectional journalism builds on the framework developed by critical race theorists, activists, and feminist legal scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw [97,98], by taking into consideration how various systems of oppression impact news events and the people involved<sup>15</sup> [96,99]. In the Parvez case, for example, intersectional journalism would attempt to examine Aqsa’s murder relative to her positionality in the power matrix (e.g., at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.), rather than limiting her case to essentialist cultural tropes under the guise of an “honour crime”.

## 8. Conclusions

The overarching goal of this paper has been to problematize the “honour crime” label by unsettling its application within popular media and political discourse and by unearthing the tropes that underlie it. It offers a unique contribution to the literature via its analytical approach, which draws concurrently from the works of Mohanty [5], Grewal [12], and Abu-Lughod [13]. This paper began with an examination of the concept of an “honour crime” and explored the diverse feminist responses to this issue. Subsequently, by applying a postcolonial feminist lens and the concepts of the “Third World woman” [5], “outsourcing patriarchy” [12], and “political work” [13], this paper critically analyzed the media rhetoric surrounding the murder of Aqsa Parvez. Building on the findings of previous research, this paper revealed that the “honour crime” label was used to perpetuate racial and ethnocentric tropes—bolstering anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiment within the Canadian context. Further, this paper found that such discursive techniques were not used among “conventional” cases of family murder. The “honour crime” label is mobilized through discursive practices to codify certain racialized and religious groups as threats to Canadian and Western liberal values. Unfortunately, these digressions have diverted attention away from the crux of this issue—violence against women.

This critical analysis and discussion revealed that greater attention needs to be given to structural factors that allow gender violence to proliferate in the first place. Though the atrociousness of Aqsa’s murder is undeniable, rooting it within a cultural narrative does not help. What popular media and political discourses failed to account for were the reasons *why* certain types of violence against women are committed, where notions of honour are used as justification, and why certain crimes are disproportionately committed amongst immigrant communities. Very few of the articles reviewed actively challenged the

failure of Canadian social structures to provide appropriate help to women within abusive situations. Had Aqsa's school or the shelter she visited taken steps to check-up on her, perhaps she would be alive today. Only with the recognition of these structural barriers and the elimination of sensationalized notions of the "honour crime", which marginalize particular communities can the issue of violence against women truly be tackled.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Honour-based violence, honour crimes and honour killings are used interchangeably throughout this paper [1].
- <sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the terms "West", "First World" or "Global North" to refer to nations that are considered part of the developed nations, i.e., characterized by having greater global political power and affluence (e.g., North America and Western Europe), in comparison to the "East", "Third World" or "Global South", which refer to the developing world; characterized by having less global political power and affluence and larger racialized populations (e.g., Iraq, India, Pakistan, etc.). The imbalance between the East and West has been explored by scholars and associated with global inequities traced to colonial histories of domination, neo-colonial practices, globalization and neoliberalism [3,4]. It should also be noted that the West/North/First World and East/South/Third World distinctions are not homogenous entities within themselves; there exists much political and economic heterogeneity within these categories as well [4].
- <sup>3</sup> A murder occurring within a fit of rage or sudden anger (as a result of some sort of provocation that causes the perpetrator to lose control), oftentimes within intimate relationships. A "defense of provocation" within the court comes with a reduced charge of manslaughter instead of murder because the crime is seen as not being premeditated [22].
- <sup>4</sup> Radical feminism makes reference to the second-wave feminist school of thought, which argued that society is built on patriarchal ideals in which men, as a group, dominate women through various forms of control. Through the act of subordinating women, men are seen as the main beneficiaries. Radical feminists view sexuality as a major vehicle by which men dominate women; it is through sexuality that men are able to assert control over women by forcing their view of femininity on women. Thus, sexuality and reproduction are seen as central sources of patriarchy [36,37].
- <sup>5</sup> Liberal feminism refers to second-wave feminist theorists that shared the political ideology of liberalism, including the promotion of equal rights/gender equity, individual autonomy and a commitment to liberal democracy and the notion of continued human progress (the progress narrative). Patriarchy is understood as a result of the denial of equal rights to women in employment, education, etc., which results in women's subordination [4,36,40].
- <sup>6</sup> Mohanty [43] provides an interesting discussion on the intersection between neoliberalism and feminism. She contends that state actors adopt depoliticized feminist theories (theories of gender without the feminist critique of power relations) in order to expand neoliberal regimes. Mohanty [43] argues that this depoliticized and decontextualized feminist lens is simply used to rhetorically fulfill the state's obligations to gender justice without delving into a deeper analysis that would allow for genuine social transformation, that is to say, feminism has been appropriated by the neoliberal state and deployed within political discourses on a superficial level. This is carried out in order to disconnect from feminism's "systematic critique and material histories of colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy" (p. 972), which would otherwise interfere with the neoliberal project. The neoliberal state seeks to advance the privatization of social justice commitments surrounding race, class and gender, what Mohanty [43] refers to as the disappearance of antiracist and feminist thought from its activist roots (postfeminist/ postrace era).
- <sup>7</sup> Newspapers speaking from one political standpoint may introduce bias into the analysis, preventing accurate conclusions from being drawn about the overall discourses and themes across news media. Sampling from across the political spectrum ensures a diverse set of perspectives and viewpoints are examined.
- <sup>8</sup> Although the news sources included in this analysis varied across the political spectrum and in terms of regional coverage (local versus national)—they all presented the Aqsa Parvez case in a similar manner using common imagery, rhetoric, tone, and stereotypical discourses despite their diverging political stances (detailed in Section 6: Results). It would, nevertheless, be unsurprising if reporting of the Parvez case differed in nuanced and finespun ways between these news platforms given their political content/coverage differences. For the purpose of this paper, however, I focus on the common themes emerging across all the newspapers rather than comparing differences between them; such an individualized comparison would fall beyond the scope of this paper and deserves a separate analysis in its own merit. The intent of the current paper is to examine how Canadian

popular media, as a whole, presented the Parvez case. At its crux, this paper notes that overarching coverage of Aqsa's case was indeed very similar regardless of the newspaper's political standpoint.

The example excerpts included in the Results section are an illustrative subset of the much larger corpus of articles about the Parvez case. The examples provided herein capture the major themes and tropes characterizing the case's media coverage.

Emphasis added.

Emphasis added.

The same year range used to identify articles about the Parvez case was used for this search: 2007–2020.

It should be noted that the cases of "family murder" presented here are not a comprehensive listing of all Canadian filicide cases. Rather it is a small sample that shows how these cases are usually characterized and to juxtapose them against the Parvez case.

Olwan [16] found similar linguistic techniques used to *Other* immigrant populations, including references to "honour killings" and "barbaric cultural practices" within the Canadian citizenship guide called Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship [81].

Intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw [97,98], is a critical feminist approach that examines the interconnected relationships between multiple social dimensions and categories [99]. More specifically, intersectionality unearths how discrimination and oppression are produced at the nexus of particular social categories (i.e., Black, woman), while privilege is produced at the nexus of others (i.e., White, man) [97–99]. Much like postcolonial feminist theory (the paradigm framing the current study), intersectionality seeks to unsettle the power relations that underpin broad social inequities and discrimination [97–99]. Although intersectionality and postcolonial feminist theory share many similarities, they are also different in several ways [100,101]. For example, intersectional feminist analysis examines social inequities by exposing the interlocking/compounding effect of oppression based on various identity categories, but largely focuses on the Western context. Postcolonial feminist theory, however, emphasizes *global* power relations/interactions, imperialism, and the distinction between the metropole and colony in perpetuating unequal and hegemonic power dynamics between different groups around the world. For a discussion see [100,101]. Both approaches offer a unique way of analyzing honour-based crime, future research may seek to explore and compare how these two distinctive frameworks tackle this topic.

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